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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Michael (Mickey) Kantor

Campaign Position: Campaign Chair

Aboard Airplane, Little Rock to Nashville

December 3, 1992

Overview

Diane D. Blair was an assistant professor of political science at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, when she took a leave of absence to serve as a senior researcher in Governor Bill Clinton's presidential campaign. Approximately one month before the November election, Blair obtained permission from the governor to conduct interviews with participants in the Clinton/Gore campaign. In her own words, ". . . I had two major purposes in mind: first, simply to preserve for posterity an accomplished campaign organization that would essentially disappear on election day; and second, through discussions with campaign workers from all departments, to see what those on the inside believed to be the key ingredients of the campaign's success." She prepared a list of questions and began interviewing people as schedules allowed.

After Blair's death in 2000, her husband, Jim Blair, donated her personal and professional papers to Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries. Michael (Mickey) Kantor reviewed this transcript and granted permission to make this interview available to scholars, students, and researchers. The final document may contain edits requested by the interviewee. This transcript was processed as part of the Diane D. Blair Papers and prepared for publication by the editorial staff of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History.

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[Beginning of Interview]

Diane Blair: This at last is Mickey Kantor.

Mickey Kantor: Who is not a young person. Not young, and very tired.

DB: Who was part of the adult caucus at the campaign.

MK: Right. Very small caucus.

DB: Mickey, you joined the campaign when and with what position?

MK: I joined Bill Clinton's campaign ten years ago. For president. Really, seriously, I think in August 1991. See, I think this campaign really starts in July 1987, when Bill Clinton decided not to run, and he had people from all over the country coming and he was going to announce the next day. I wish I had the date in my mind. I can't remember it. And I sat on the back porch at the Governor's Mansion with Bill and Carl Wagner and discussed the pros and cons of his running, and he decided sitting on the back porch. And Chelsea came out and she said to him, "Dad, I'm going off to day camp." She was nine at the time—eight—and he gave her a kiss. And she said, "Mom and I are going to Hawaii, and I guess you can't go." And I think that's the moment Bill Clinton decided he wasn't going to run for president in 1987. And two things—three things come to mind. I think it starts there. One, he realized at that point what it took to run for president—the money, the time, the commitment, the effort, the complete concentration. And he realized that he was not ready and that he was not ready to put his family through it. But it also focused him on, when he finally decided to run, what it was going to take. I think it was an important time. I don't know if he'd agree. I thought it was important. I mean, we all think things are important

because you're involved in them. Then he went inside and told people from all the country he wasn't going to run and he announced the next day that he was not going to run for president. I jump forward to all during the next four years, there were continual conversations with a lot of people around the country and obviously Arkansas. His major concern as you know was he'd made what amounted to a pledge not to. To serve out his four years as governor. And that was bothering him a lot. There were those of us who didn't live in Arkansas who were screaming, ranting, raving, pleading, begging, cajoling, arguing that he should run for president. I was convinced, absolutely convinced beyond any doubt, that he should run. That he had an enormous opportunity. I believed then that the worst that could happen was he'd look terrific and not get the nomination. But I believed fervently if he got the nomination he'd be elected president because I thought the American people, when they looked at George Bush and Bill Clinton, no matter what the situation, they would believe it was time for a transition into the twenty-first century.

DB: Even when Bush was up there with a 90 percent approval rating?

MK: I just thought Bill Clinton could beat him. When I met him thirteen, fourteen years ago—I don't know if you know this—I was stunned.

DB: Where and when was this?

MK: I met him in Washington. He'd just been elected governor.

DB: The first time?

MK: Yes, the first time. I was on the Legal Services Board with Hillary. I met him at something in Washington. I went back to California and told my political friends

that the profile of a Democratic president—that if the good Lord had come down and said now let's make the perfect candidate, they would have—and I don't say this to be ingratiating—I think I'm pretty hard on Bill Clinton, but he was obviously bright and able. He was creative. He was committed. He was a good politician. Incredibly articulate. Obviously, good looking. Had presence. Filled a room when he walked into it. From the very first moment, I'm not lying, you know there are many people like me. I mean I'm not so prescient. You cannot help when you meet him but say this person is different. He is not the average bear. Jumping forward, in 1991 we had continual conversations and ruminations. For me, when it was clear I think he was going to be talked into it—we all had different times—was when he spoke to a group called Education First in Los Angeles and knocked their socks off. This was the crème de la crème of the Hollywood establishment. They walked out of that luncheon believing they had met someone who could be the next president. Conversation proceeded all during the summer with many, many, many people. Only Bill Clinton could have so many people involved in one conversation. It was like a movable feast. Then in August 1991, we had a meeting in Washington in which a number of his old friends gathered around a table—

DB: Do you remember who was there?

MK: Oh, sure. Carl Wagner, Harold Ickes, Susan Thomases, Vernon Jordan, Dick Riley, Bill Winter, Hillary Clinton, Mark Gearan—who is the unsung hero of this campaign—Elaine Kamarck, Bill Gaulston, Al From—a lot of people who had known each other for years in campaigns but had one thing in common, and that

was Bill Clinton. The most eclectic group you can imagine. I chaired the meeting I think for lack of anybody else who Bill and Hillary could think of who was dumb enough to take on that assignment. So that sort of led to me becoming chair of the campaign. I'm still not sure why they wanted me to do that, but I became the chair. I was on conference calls every morning. Those famous calls with half of America on them. It wasn't until February 9 when I arrived in New Hampshire that it became a full-time absolute everyday seven-day-a-week thing for me.

DB: I've laughed about it too, but really how many people were on those original conference calls?

MK: Twenty to thirty. And what's interesting is they worked pretty well. They were frustrating at times, but they worked. And they worked because, as things always worked around Bill Clinton, they appeared to be either the epitome of anarchy or chaos, but they're not really, because people have such a deep commitment to him and to Hillary that they were willing to make them work and they were willing to put their egos aside. For the most part. Not totally. And work together. And everyone from Al From to Bob Reich to Derek Shearer to Susan Thomases to Vernon Jordan—I mean, very different in some ways, but had, of course, Bill Clinton in common. If you look at this campaign—the Sperling Breakfast—Bill and Hillary went there the day after that conference.

DB: Do you know whose idea the Sperling Breakfast was?

MK: Well, it was mine. I'm pretty sure it was mine. Bill and I had talks about concerns that were obviously running around—rumors running around—and I

said that I thought he should get out in front of it. And I said, “You know, there is a reality and you’ve said it before, you’ve not been perfect. And people know that. You might as well tell them. And try to take any sting out of what may or may not happen later in this campaign.” And they agreed. I thought that was such a clear indication of how smart they were, how clear they were, how committed they were, and what courage they had as people. That’s not easy. I could never publicly go and talk about my private life the way they did. What’s interesting to me is how little impact that made in terms of coverage. I thought that was a plus, that the national press had told us how Bob Kerrey and Tom Harkin thought Bill Clinton was not in the first tier. When the national press began to see Bill Clinton at the Cleveland DLC speech and the Chicago speech at the state chairs, then his Georgetown speeches, the Sperling Breakfast, the ability to begin to raise money, watching him connect with human beings, began to convince the national press that he was not only real, but he could be a winner. Jerry and Clinton completely overlapped in terms of political constituency— young, bright, exciting, charismatic, new. They had all that going for them. Kerrey’s inability—and Bill’s ability—to connect, to define, to be prepared, made a huge difference. One of the footnotes to this, in the spring of 1991, Heidi and I had a small dinner party for Bill at a restaurant called Mr. Chow’s in Los Angeles, where around the table people like Bud Yorkin and Trisha and Mike Medavoy and Peter Guber and Linda Guber—everyone of which finally became an important part of this campaign. And what I’m coming to is, he did the usual Bill Clinton. He was wonderful, he was bright, he was able, he was quick. Then Peter

Guber asked him a question that I sucked in my gut and said, “Oh, no, he’s got him.” The question was, Guber said, “I’m stunned by the inability of presidents to set up a White House in a way that is manageable. Have you ever thought about that?” Bill Clinton started in 1960 with the Kennedy Administration and ran with every administration up until the present time, he told him what went right, what went wrong, how they organized, how they did. It was a stunning answer. Guber was blown away. I was blown away. I’ve known Bill Clinton fourteen years and I was blown away. Nobody in the room could believe he had thought about that. And two things came through; how bright he was and how well he was prepared, but that he knew he could be president, and the confidence level of someone to answer the question. Humble Harry would say well, of course I’ve got a long way to go, and so on. I mean, he didn’t do that at all.

DB: So Kerrey’s weaknesses were an important plus for us.

MK: Kerrey’s weaknesses were an important plus. Harkin’s inability to spread his base. Tsongas’s inability to raise enough money. And Bill’s connection—the press watching Bill Clinton, as all of us know. Remember in January he took off like a shot and was well on his way to winning? He was going to walk away with the nomination. The press had announced his race over. Then it was the Jennifer Flowers hit, the draft hit. It was February 9, and I flew to New Hampshire overnight with Harry Thomason. Got off the plane at 3:00 in the morning. It was eight below zero. Harry and I had talked the whole way saying, “Well I guess we got to go, we got no choice. Don’t leave a friend no matter what happens. We’ve got to go there, we’ve got to be with him.” Because I hadn’t planned to really

join the campaign until after that on a full-time basis. That week is the most incredible week I've ever seen in my twenty years in American politics. I literally saw a human being, two people, grab a state by the shoulders and say, "You will not ignore us and you won't write us off and you will not marginalize us and we are going to prove to you we have what it takes." I'm talking about Hillary and Bill. It was unbelievable. Unbelievable. I wouldn't have bet three cents that he could survive those two hits he took. I began to believe when three things happened. One, *Nightline*—well, the press conference that morning, which was Carville's idea, the letter is your friend. Carville was right. *Nightline* that night. Harry's idea, and Harry and Heidi putting together Bill's stunning performance in that town meeting, the first one we ever did on television. The next night, the town meeting we did with the phone and call-ins and the speeches at Dover, Nashua, and then the debate Sunday night when nothing happened. So it was important. Nothing happened. No one asked about Gennifer Flowers. No one asked about the draft. They let Bill Clinton stay on substance.

DB: What kind of direct or indirect impact did all the Arkansas people rushing up there to witness for him have?

MK: The ability of the Arkansans to say basically, "Ask me about my governor," to say, "He's not who they're saying he is, we know him best," made a huge impact. The ability of these young people to organize, led by Mark Gearan and Mitch Schwartz and Michael Whouley. To get videotapes out to literally thousands of homes. But the on the ground—Christopher Hyland, David Matthews. There's a town five miles from Paul Tsongas's hometown where he got killed. You know,

we won New Hampshire except for that. We just got killed in that one place—the suburbs, literally, the suburbs of Boston. But, yes, they made a huge difference. Yes, the organization made a huge difference. Yes, the incredible creativity of James Carville, Frank Greer, Mandy Grunwald, Bruce Lindsey, as usual, hanging in—nobody giving him credit. Bev Lindsey. All the people from Little Rock. I've got to tell you it comes down to two people. None of us would have had that kind of guts and courage. And the worst night was Monday night before the election. The worst—except for two tragedies I've gone through in my life—the worst. Heidi and I had not left the Days Inn for eight days. David Broder and Dan Balz invited us to dinner, so we decided, “We're getting out of here.” We had nothing else we could do. Went to dinner at that nice place. What was the name of it? Anyway. So we had dinner. Dan Balz gets a phone call, comes back, and there's this look on his face. And I thought, ‘Uh-oh, something he didn't want to tell me.’” And he finally said, “Bill's falling like a rock and Kerrey's going to catch him. He may come in third.” And Heidi and I looked at each other and basically wanted to cry, but we had to keep up. And David Broder said, “Well, I don't believe it.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “That's not what's going to happen. I don't care what the polls say. He is going to finish a strong second. He has connected with these people.” And I thought David was making me feel better. I literally thought oh, he's just making nice, so Heidi and I won't go home and cry, you see. We went back to the Days Inn. Stan Greenberg grabbed me as I walked up the steps to that second floor and said, “I've got to talk to you alone.” And took me in his room, he said, “Mickey, it's falling apart, you

better tell Bill. It's over. Free fall. Over." I was just, "Why me, Lord, why me?"

When Bill came back after campaigning his heart out, it was 12:30 in the morning. I said to Hillary and Bill, "I think you'd better come to my room."

Hillary said, "I'm going to bed." Hillary knew exactly what—you know, the look on my face. I'm not exactly a poker face, not when it comes to Bill Clinton or anything else. Went to my room with Stan, Heidi, Carville, Eli Segal—who else was in there? Was Mark? I can't remember now—Bruce. Carville was literally curled up in a ball. It was one of those rooms where you have two double beds. Heidi and I were sitting on the bed and Carville was curled up at our feet in a ball in a fetal position. And I told Bill, I went through the various polls, the free-falling, talked about that we were all committed to him and that he ought to continue. We believed that there were ways to end this in a way that it would not look like he was crushed by these two problems. And I've never seen such an act of class in my life from anybody. Bill sat there. Didn't blame anybody. Didn't blame the press. Talked about the mistakes he'd made. Praised the staff, talked about how wonderful they'd made the campaign. Said, "We'll just go out there tomorrow and work our hearts out and whatever happens, happens." Went to bed.

But one thing was said in that meeting that I'll never forget. Stan Greenberg, God bless him, said, "You know, there is something funny about these polls. There's one poll *USA Today* did, comes out tomorrow, that shows the overnight tracking tonight. We're going up. And they have been the most conservative." He says, "I don't know if it's a two-night roll or just a one-night blip. I'd better check." I said, "Why don't you check that, Stan, and we'll talk in the morning." But I said

to Bill, “Bill, do not take heart in that.” I said, “You’ve got every poll showing the opposite. Might as well be realistic.” The next morning, early, Stan came to me and said I checked, it was a two-night poll, and my heart skipped a beat. I said, “Don’t you dare tell anybody.” Then the first exit poll came out. It was unbelievable.

DB: Whose idea was it for you to claim victory?

MK: Joe Grandmaison. Joe Grandmaison called me at 2:00 in the afternoon. He deserves credit. He said, “Mickey, remember what George McGovern did in 1972?” I said, “Yeah, what did Manciewicz do?” “Came down early. You know, he lost New Hampshire, too. Claimed victory. Muskie was put on the defensive, and McGovern took off. You ought to do the same thing.” Great idea. Talked to Begala. I don’t know—I think Begala was the one who thought up the Comeback Kid, but I’m not sure. Could have been Bill. I don’t know. Got over to the hotel, told Bill, you’re going to go down there and claim victory, yeah, yeah, yeah. But you don’t know Clinton. He’s gabbing with everybody and time is running and it is almost eight o’clock when they’re going to go up. Heidi grabbed him and said, “You are going down. Go.” Went down, did it. Clearly, it was the right thing to do. So Grandmaison— it was his idea. Now, what do you say? This is just a sidelight that was so funny about this campaign. I walked into the ballroom and Harry Thomason was standing with Mort Engelberg. This is before Bill. I looked at the stage and there were flowers all over the stage—no American flag. And Mort looked at me and said, “It looks like a Jewish wedding.” The advance person had bought thousands of dollars of flowers. And

Mort says, “Mickey, can we move them?” I said, “Take them and take them to Children’s Hospital in Manchester. Get them out of here and put the flags up there.” So Harry and Mort, thank goodness for them, changed the whole room around. Just turned it around. “Looks like a Jewish wedding.” That’s one of my favorite lines in this campaign. Well, the thing that will never be noted—his comeback speech was a great speech, but the second speech that night, which wasn’t recorded, was better than the first speech. After the first speech he went behind the stage and did satellite interviews. He was so revved up and the crowd was staying, he went back in there. Heidi and I had gone up to the suite—everybody went back up. We went back down. We heard he was doing a second speech. People walking out of there were crying. They said it was unbelievable. And no one recorded it. No one recorded it. I am so angry we never recorded that speech.

DB: He had called me that day and was trying to remember where in Shakespeare they talk about “There is a tide in the affairs of men.” He wanted to use that phrase, but, of course, Bill Clinton wanted to know which Shakespeare play it came from and who said it.

MK: I was so sorry that people like you or David Wilhelm or all these people who worked so hard were in Little Rock and could not be there. That was, at least to me, the single most emotional moment of this campaign. It still is. I mean, the convention was great. Election night was great. Everything was great. Everything was fine. But that had real emotion. And I think he felt it, too. It was like that was the point—not only did we all know, we always knew he was

special, we knew this campaign was going to be very different and very special. Something was happening that you couldn't put your finger on, you didn't understand, but he had the ability to connect with people in a way that no one else I'd ever seen could do.

DB: Let me ask you something you alluded to earlier, when you said you had these conference calls seemed like anarchy, but in fact it worked. How would you describe, if you can describe, the campaign structure, the organization?

MK: It was a typical horizontal Bill Clinton arrangement. Give people a job, let them do it, allow them to be creative, respect them and trust their judgment until proven otherwise. Take chances. We always opted when in doubt take a chance. The only time we got into trouble in this campaign were times that we didn't take chances. That's when we got in trouble.

DB: Toward the end in the general election, I felt we were just holding the ball, sitting on our lead. Scared me to death.

MK: It was a mistake. Every time Bill Clinton plays it cautiously, at least in my view, he makes a mistake. He can turn a sow's ear into a silk purse every time. You take advantage of his abilities.

DB: But from the standpoint of being manager, how do you manage something like this?

MK: My view of my role—and I think it was confusing. I think it could have been done better and I probably made a lot of mistakes. And, frankly, I think Bill and Hillary and I didn't think it through enough—was to just try to make sure the big things got done. Now it was my view of doing that—that if I tried to impose

myself and tell everyone how to do it, not just let's make sure it's done, follow up, make sure, two things would happen. One, I would stifle their creativity, which would have been really stupid on my part. Two—and I say this without being humble—I've been in this maybe too long. You want people with new, fresh ideas to do it. I saw my role as—when it got too wild or there was real caution—as to raise questions, make people explain, and then stay out of their way. Now you can say, “Oh, you should have taken a firmer hand.” Maybe I should have at times, but it worked. And I don't think it's good for Bill Clinton, or that he would never allow anyone to control him or should control him in that way. I don't like it. He doesn't like it. I think it's bad for him. I think he feeds off people and their ideas. He's a wonderful politician. And so it worked in the way that there was a loose sense that, and I probably could say no to things, but would not—we used it fairly judiciously. But basically, Wilhelm was running it in Little Rock, and on the road, you know, they got together in the mornings and just made decisions. When I got to New Hampshire I just sat around the table every day at every meeting and just made decisions. There's a lot of collegiality—awful lot. And it worked pretty darned well. Now, at certain points it might have been too much. I mean, there's a balance there. But if you had to opt for allowing people to be creative and not stifling them, and allowing Clinton to reach out to people and literally suck up their ideas, I'd always opt for that.

DB: Well, I used to watch in utter amazement those wonderful kids bursting into James, George, Eli, whoever. I have never seen such accessibility on the part of those at the top.

MK: Everybody learned. Now, that would drive a traditionalist crazy, and in some ways I am much more traditional than many of the people in the campaign, but it was clear to me that you couldn't do it any other way. It wasn't going to work any other way.

DB: I wonder if it could ever be that way again if he is President Clinton running for reelection.

MK: No. You can recreate some of it, but not all of it. It's going to make it tougher. It's going to be a new culture. You just can't do that around a president for all kinds of reasons, most of which is the crush of the kind of decision the president has to make and the way which a president has to be moved in a bubble, so to speak, and it'll never be—I mean, it will never be like in New Hampshire where you had six of us that sat around the table every morning at six in the morning and sort of made it up. And he made it up as he was going along. We used to call it the Renegade Motorcade. He'd go out there and have an idea and then just go do it. People say that's crazy. Well, he did it. He just did it. It worked. It's fine. In the end, it's his life. It was his race.

DB: I wonder how many previous presidential candidates there have been who had that kind of just gut strategic sense, and then you add Hillary into it—

MK: None. Now, I've only been around twenty years, but I've been in five presidential campaigns at one level or another, and I've done, of course, campaigns in California. I have never met two people with their kind of ability. Never. In any field. They are special. They just are. And I say that as a friend, but it's clear. I think people who are not even their friends will tell you they're

special. Hillary Clinton may be the single brightest person I've ever met in my life. And when I have a problem of any kind, other than my wife, she's the first person I'll call and ask. Whether it's political, whether it's legal, whether it's kids. She is a clear pool of advice just sitting there.

DB: What is it that you want to make certain that history knows about this campaign?

MK: There was a commitment to something bigger than Bill Clinton. It wasn't like McGovern, which was philosophical and anti-war and from the times. It was more generational and transitional. In other words, generational in age, transitional in terms of going into the next century. In other words, we are facing a whole new set of challenges. It is a new world order. Things have got to be different. We've lost connection with our government and vice-versa. Bill Clinton represented everything that needed to be done—not everything—a lot of what needed to be done and he understood it and the people working with him understood it, either intellectually or just intuitively. And that's what I would want remembered.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]